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## LATIN AS A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE<sup>\*</sup>

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In his recent presidential address to the British Academy Viscount Bryce enumerated the tasks which lie before the next generation, and among them he placed the problem of a universal language. No doubt it surprised many that this distinguished intellectual veteran of England saw fit to image before the eager recruits, whose task it will be to reconstruct a badly shattered world, this ancient *fata Morgana*. Did not he himself witness the rise and decline of Volapük and Esperanto, two high tides in the welling hopes of those who looked forward to a world united by the bond of a common tongue?

The twentieth century seemingly has put off the search for a universal language as something childlike when compared with the tremendous tasks which demand an immediate solution today. Still a residue of benefit remains from the wide-eyed eager search which excited the last generation. All sides of the question have been exposed in heated debate. We now have at our fingers' tips all the evils which the modern world suffers from the curse of a babel of literary and learned languages. Everybody now knows that there are but three ways of introducing a universal language: first, by reviving a "dead" language like Greek or Latin; second,

<sup>\*</sup> This paper is noteworthy for two reasons: first, it is offered by a professor of medieval history, who writes on his own initiative; and, second, it is a plea suggested by an urgent practical difficulty in which the historian looks to the Latinist for help.

Though it may seem a too ambitious plan to attempt to make Latin a universal language, the suggestion is well worth considering that it could become a ready means of communication of ideas between scholars of all nations.

From other quarters, too, a call is arising for a method of Latin instruction that will give early control in the actual use of the language. We have spent much time on defense of the classics; here is a chance to begin a significant offensive. Evidently allies will not be lacking; and their help should be cordially welcomed. The entrance of the United States into the world-war meant something more than additional men and stores; it changed the cry "We must save Paris!" to "On to Berlin!" [H. C. N.]

by adopting one of the most widespread living languages like English or French; third, by inventing an entirely new one. We have all read what seemed to us definitive arguments that all of these plans are foredoomed to ultimate failure. Some of us in non-linguistic walks of scholarship, who have spent a good part of our youthful energies in acquiring several living languages of Western Europe, have perhaps displayed some zest in hounding our poor reluctant students to do likewise, but we are beginning to despair in the face of insuperable difficulties.

A generation ago it was considered the hall mark of scholarship to be *trilinguis* and there was general unanimity that the three languages should be, *par excellence*, English, French, and German, as is clear from the requirement of French and German for the Ph.D. degree in most of our universities. Today, to say nothing of the sudden eclipse of German, there is no longer such unanimity of opinion. Italian and especially Spanish in this country are coming clamorously to the fore. Russian is now being mastered by many scholars and an increasing number are even laboring with Chinese and Japanese. On the one hand linguistic demands are becoming more and more overwhelming, and on the other the rising generations are becoming reckless in the face of impossible demands upon their time and energy. Several universities have made desperate attempts to exact from all undergraduates a reading knowledge of at least one foreign language, but it seems impossible to enforce even this minimum requirement. In this country the majority of even the more highly educated classes are actually lulling themselves content to be monoglot with the vain hope that English will soon become the universal language of the world.

One can turn from these mournful reflections to a happier time. Let us transport ourselves to the thirteenth century and mingle with the turbulent students who came from far and near to Oxford or Paris, to Salamanca or Bologna. "Drunken English," "effeminate Frenchmen," "furious Germans," "boastful Normans," "vulgar Burgundians," "cowardly Lombards," "turbulent Romans," "cruel Sicilians,"—such were the epithets which flew about in the streets of Paris and elsewhere. Yet this otherwise discordant

crowd was bound together by the tie of a common learned language. There could not have been such interesting cosmopolitan centers of learning in the Middle Ages if there had not been an international language in Western Europe. No matter how distant were the countries from which they came, when wandering students met they could all join in the joyous

Omittamus studia,  
Dulce est desipere,  
Et carpamus dulcia  
Iuventutis tenere.

To men who lived in the thirteenth century it seemed axiomatic that the Western world always would have a common language. *Latini* they proudly called themselves, especially during the time of the Crusades, when they were meeting Greeks and Mohammedan Turks in the East. Dante never dreamed that his *Divine Comedy* would some day be very instrumental in ousting Latin. In his *De vulgari eloquentia*, Book I, chapter ix, he speaks of the instability of the vernacular tongues and contrasts them with "Grammar," i.e., Latin. He says:

Hence were set in motion the inventors of the art of grammar, which is nothing else but a kind of unchangeable identity of speech in different times and places. This, having been settled by the common consent of many peoples, seems exposed to the arbitrary will of none in particular, and consequently cannot be variable. They therefore invented grammar, in order that we might not, on account of the variation of speech fluctuating at the will of individuals, either fail altogether in attaining, or at least attain but a partial knowledge of the opinions and exploits of the ancients, or of those whom difference of place causes to differ from us.<sup>1</sup>

As for Petrarch and his followers, they were sure that they had succeeded in establishing Latin as the common language of the world beyond any peradventure.

We, however, can now see very clearly how rapidly Latin was losing ground in favor of the vernaculars, from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. At the critical period when the European Latin West began its conquest of the whole world by the invention of printing and the discovery of new oceans and conti-

<sup>1</sup>Translated by A. G. Ferrers Howell, in *A Translation of the Latin Works of Dante Alighieri* ("The Temple Classics"), pp. 28, 29. London: Dent & Co., 1904.

nents the Latin language was losing its hold as a living language. What if Latin America today were Latin indeed! What if North America, Australia, and Africa had been peopled by settlers who spoke Latin instead of a number of vernaculars all more or less akin to it! Enough of what might have been. The outstanding fact is that at a time when, if Latin had been spreading and growing, nearly the whole earth might easily have been Latinized, at that critical time Latin was losing its hold upon Europe as a living language and was giving way to numerous vernaculars which have divided the modern world in so many linguistic camps without even a common literary or learned bond of union.

What was the cause of this turn of events which to some has seemed one of the earth's greatest calamities? Two fundamental causes killed Latin. One was the neglect of the study of language and literature in the thirteenth century; the other, the attempt of the humanists to revive Ciceronian Latin in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and to substitute it for the living medieval Latin of their day.

The intellectual activity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries which crystallized into medieval universities was one of the most remarkable in the history of learning. The fact that in proportion to its magnitude it made a comparatively slight impression on the modern world is due to two egregious mistakes perpetrated in those centuries. In the midst of that intellectual ferment which we regard so coldly, men like Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon pointed out that two absolutely essential branches of learning were being neglected hopelessly, namely, the study of languages and the natural sciences. Bacon clamored wildly to make his contemporaries read two books which lay open before them, the book of nature and the book of man's records here upon earth. Almost all the marvels of modern civilization have resulted from the fact that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries men heeded the advice to which the thirteenth century had turned a deaf ear.

We shall not deal with the natural sciences but shall turn our attention to the failure of the thirteenth century to get interested in the records of man. This entailed the neglect of the study of language and literature, of history, and all the other social sciences.

In the twelfth century there were many hopeful signs that Latin language and literature would be fostered as they deserved to be in such an era of general enlightenment. There was a veritable revival of interest in the ancient classics in Northern France. Some good Latin literature was written, and there was a lively study of the Latin language. About 1200, two grammars were written which treated Latin as a living language, and in some ways improved upon the ancient books of Priscian. These were the *Doctrinale* and the *Graecismus*, which gained a remarkable reputation. It seemed marvelous to the humanists in the fifteenth century that these poor texts attained such renown. Their extraordinary success is explained by one of the most vital facts of all literary history.

This fact of supreme importance is that at the beginning of the thirteenth century, when the university movement was in its freshest bloom, the study of Latin language and literature was crowded to the wall by more popular studies. On all sides voices were heard lamenting this neglect. None is more characteristic than the complaint of John Garland, a professor of grammar in the University of Paris:

Aid me [he wrote in 1234], illustrious poets, whom golden renown matches with gold, you whom the city of Orleans attracts from all the regions of the world, you, the glory of the fountain of Hippocrene. God has chosen you to sustain the edifice of eloquence shaken to its very foundation; for the Latin language is decaying, the green fields of the authors are withering, and the jealous blasts of Boreas have blighted the flowery meadows.

John Garland inveighed against the *Doctrinale* and *Graecismus* as the little twin apes which were doing more harm than good. He tried to improve upon the study of Latin by writing other grammars which are extant, but which have not been published to this day. His contemporaries were absolutely deaf to his entreaties. They neglected grammar, they turned away from the Latin classics which had flourished in the twelfth century. Those who studied Latin construction at all usually read the *Doctrinale* in slovenly content. The Latin style of the thirteenth century is much inferior to that of the twelfth. Universities gave but the slightest attention to grammar and utterly neglected

literature. The wonder is not that Latin was so bad in Petrarch's time but that it was still so good. Woe to the generation which neglects to cultivate one of the most important inventions of man, the art of communication by speech and by pen.

Out of this woe the humanists tried to rescue the world by reviving Ciceronian Latin. For over a century Latin Christendom had been starving for want of linguistic and literary studies, and now in the fourteenth century Petrarch and his followers fell upon them like Esau upon his mess of pottage. In their eagerness they unwittingly made the second tremendous mistake which killed Latin. They rendered us incalculable services by reviving interest not only in ancient Latin, but in all phases of antiquity. They opened wide the book of the records of man and thus ushered in a new day. But in so doing they cast the bitterest aspersions upon the living Latin of their time, hoping to remove it bodily to give way to Ciceronian prose. Here was the parting of the ways. Comparatively few men were willing to subject themselves to the rigorous discipline necessary to become Ciceronians, and they gladly turned to the vernaculars, which now won an easy victory over Latin. It is strange that this patent fact is realized today by so few when, as early as 1851, Sir Francis Palgrave expressed it very clearly in his *History of Normandy and of England*, I, 77, as follows:

The revival of Letters rather checked than enlarged the dominion of the Latin language. Classical correctness and the ethos of modern society are incompatible elements. The elegancies of Latin are destructive of its practical utility: there was no surer mode of stinting the capacities of thought than the pedantry which restricted that thought to Ciceronian phrase.

In our Latin studies it behooves us to begin where the medieval universities left off about the beginning of the thirteenth century. They made an overwhelming mistake when they failed to study and to improve their Latin. In spite of all their neglect the ancient handmaiden served them very well, for Latin became a pliable, easy tool in the bustling schools and even in the world-markets of that time. The finest shades of philosophical and theological reasoning were now expressed in the Roman language, which in Cicero's time was stiff in that respect when compared with the fluid Greek. But all this was done in a haphazard bungling way when there was absolutely no control such as results from

a scholarly study of language and literature. Hence the living medieval Latin could not withstand the sledgehammer blows of the humanists. Instead of molding and shaping it to meet new conditions, they cracked it all to pieces in their holy wrath.

We should now heed the wailing despair of John Garland and Roger Bacon, and make amends for the neglect of the thirteenth century. They pleaded for a more careful study of the Latin of their day in order to make it a more elegant and more practical medium of everyday intercourse for enlightened people. In that spirit we should approach the study of medieval Latin. It will serve as the best model of an international language which actually worked in long practice and which was unconsciously ousted as such by the folly of the men who dealt with it from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century.

We have spent such endless effort upon classical Latin, why cannot we now afford a modicum of it for medieval Latin? In the last International Congress of Historical Studies held in London there was set forth the grave need of a dictionary or dictionaries of medieval Latin. What a boon it would be to have the life-histories of Latin words from classic to modern times!

Modern skepticism about Latin as a living language is due largely to ignorance of the true reasons for the decline of medieval Latin as a universal language in Western Europe. With prejudice and ignorance removed by closer examination of medieval Latin, there would soon come an appreciation of the wonderful service it rendered as a means of enlightenment and as a bond of union in an age of disruption and turmoil. If the pressing problem of a universal language will ever be solved, the solution will probably be a very simple one which has been lying unheeded on the surface all these years. Printing was a comparatively simple invention. Many beardless boys are daily making inventions which are much more ingenious and difficult. Yet when this rather insignificant step in the manufacture of books was once taken, it revolutionized the world. Surely modern scholarship, which has half-listened to many wild and complicated schemes, can afford to give ear to the simple plea to examine medieval Latin in the hope that it may furnish the key to the world-problem of a universal language.



This is not a plea for the bodily revival of medieval Latin. Such a thing would be impossible even if it were advisable. The Latin of the Middle Ages was so diverse in different times and places that it would be impossible to revive it as Ciceronian Latin was revived in the fourteenth century. We merely advocate that medieval Latin, especially that of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, should be studied scientifically in order that we may learn what made it the unrivaled world-language of the Middle Ages. If Latin had been studied thus in the great universities of the thirteenth century it surely would have become a much more serviceable instrument than it was, and would not have been exposed to the ridicule of the humanists. We must make good the neglect of the medieval schools; we must build upon the sound foundation which they had but upon which they failed to erect a Latin structure which might have been useful for all time.

This work must be begun in the schools in which Latin is now taught. The new aim in teaching Latin should be to impart the language in such a form and in such a way that students could easily read, write, and speak it as they did in medieval universities. In this age of sweeping innovations it surely would not be revolutionary to alter somewhat a branch of instruction which was stereotyped over four centuries ago. With the aid of our profound knowledge of classical Latin there is no reason to believe that we could not make our Latin simpler and more logical than that which even in the best medieval universities was practically allowed to shift for itself without expert guidance. Crudities and absurdities we would reject and designate as obsolete in our dictionaries. Then we would address ourselves to the task of inventing terms for things and ideas which did not exist in the Middle Ages. Fortunately this would be comparatively easy. The dictionaries of all our modern languages are full of Latin and Graeco-Latin words, especially in the domain of the natural sciences, medicine, law, philosophy, and theology. Most of these could be incorporated in our modern Latin dictionaries without change.

The difficulty of Latin construction no doubt looms up in the minds of many as a stumbling-block to all schemes of making it a living language. Such fears are not well grounded. It seems

preposterous to believe that our splendidly equipped institutions of learning could not do what medieval schools did when in a few years they imparted a good knowledge of Latin to almost any child which happened to be sent to school. A vastly greater proportion of children are now sent to school, but who is ready to admit that they would be unable to do as well as the children of the Middle Ages? The experiment is worth a trial. There is still in the world an enormous amount of machinery for the teaching of Latin. All of it could soon be employed in teaching Latin as a living language. The scope of the Latin teacher would become widened enormously. It would not be long before much of the machinery which now exists for teaching modern languages would be placed at the service of Latin. A very large percentage of persons beyond school age have had some training in Latin. They would not be unwilling to retrace some of their old steps and to take those new ones which would enable them to keep up with their children in the free use of Latin for general reading and for everyday as well as for scholarly intercourse.

The greatest opposition, however, would come from those who would exclaim: "What, shall we go back to monks' Latin and forsake the good old classics to steep ourselves in medieval literature?" Heaven forbid! If such a movement as is outlined above should get under way the great majority of men would scarcely be conscious of the fact that the living Latin which they were mastering had anything special to do with the Middle Ages. A knowledge of Latin would mean the ability to read all Latin which has ever been written. It would be astounding if modern teachers who had taught their students to read and speak Latin fluently could not induce them to read the masterpieces which laid the foundations of Latin as a literary language. The medieval student who composed the "*Omittamus studia*" had no difficulty in reading "*Integer vitae scelerisque purus*" without grammar or dictionary; at least he could never have conceived of the ineluctable difficulties which confront the average Sophomore when he turns to that ode for the first time. Dante believed that the Latin of his day was very much like that of classical antiquity. Instead of confining us to the literary output of the Middle Ages, such a

living tongue would rather open to us the entire wide world of Latin already written. All these literary treasures would still be ours while Latin performed the stupendous rôle of a universal language.

Eventually such a plea as is contained in this paper must be made to all lovers of humanity. Fortunately mankind no longer stands in helpless awe before the dread words of Genesis: "And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech. . . . And Jehovah said, Come let us go down and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." Happily we are more inclined to exclaim with the aged Ulysses: "'Tis not too late to seek a newer world." More than ever before the world is in desperate need of a common tongue. Who will be rash enough in this age of wonders to predict that a solution of the ancient riddle will never be found?

In the first instance, however, we must turn to all friends of Latin; not only to those who have been taught and who are teaching the treasures of classical Latin, but also to those who are daily consulting the vast masses of Latin records which have been written in medieval and modern times. Perhaps even from the ranks of students of Roman law, medieval history, or medieval Latin philology, will arise an impulse which will embody this idea in manuals from which Latin may be learned far more fluently and easily than it was learned by any student in the medieval schools. Such books would speedily beget teachers who would become living interpreters of the neo-Latin which would once again encircle the lands.